

LARGE SHIPMENTS TRACED TO CONTRA AIR BASE

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WASHINGTON

A former CIA air transport company, which reportedly played key roles in both arms sales to Iran and shipments to Nicaraguan rebels, flew more than 400 tons of cargo this year into an air base used by an American-manned Contra resupply operation, according to documents.

Southern Air Transport of Miami reported making 15 flights into El Salvador's Ilopango military airport in the first six months of 1986 from Portugal, New Orleans, Miami and Washington, D.C., according to Transportation Department records. The records show a total of 406 tons of cargo aboard the planes, but not the type of supplies.

The flights coincide with creation of an air resupply wing to carry weapons to the Contra rebels, which according to government sources, was managed by White House aide Oliver North, and financed with \$10 million to \$30 million in profits from secret U.S. arms sales to Iran.

Southern Air officials declined to discuss their operations. North, a lieutenant colonel in the Marines who was on assignment at the White House, was fired by President Reagan last week.

The air operation came to light Oct. 5 when an arms-laden, American-manned C-123K cargo plane was shot down over southern Nicaragua, killing two Americans and leaving a third, Eugene Hasenfus, a prisoner of Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

The records, made available to The Associated Press, detail for the first time since the crash of the cargo plane the magnitude and extent of the airwing resupply operation, in terms of the volume of cargo transported.

At the time of the diversions — earlier this year — the U.S. government was barred from giving military aid to the Contra rebels, and the White House role in the secret supply network is a principal focus of congressional investigations.

In a further development, The New York Times, in its Thursday edition, reported that the same planes and crews that were used to carry non-lethal aid to the Contras were used at other times to supply the Contras with weapons.

The newspaper, quoting two sources, said the planes took the non-lethal supplies from the United States to Honduras and El Salvador, where the planes were unloaded and filled with weapons from Europe that were usually delivered to Contra camps.

The flights early this year came while a congressional ban on military help for the rebels was in effect.

Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliot Abrams told the newspaper the procedure was legal.

"If we contract an airplane and crew it does not make us responsible for other work they may do while in Central America," the newspaper quoted Abrams as saying.

Documents recovered from the downed C-123K show the air wing making scores of flights this year to deliver aid to Contra bases, both inside and outside Nicaragua. The Southern Air flights and amount of cargo would fit with such a large-scale operation.

But some administration and Contra officials have contended that the resupply effort would have cost no more than a few million dollars and that the rebels were chronically short of supplies.

"It was very clear to us that the resistance forces were broke" after the \$27 million in non-lethal U.S. aid expired last spring, said one senior administration official, who spoke only on condition he not be named.

Congressional investigators also are examining the relationship between Southern Air, which was sold by the CIA in 1973, and the Contra resupply operation. Documents and principals make clear that Southern Air played a central role in the effort, paying for work done on planes and recruiting crews. Sources said the airline also carried the Iran shipments.

In routine Transportation Department reports on its civil air charters, Southern Air said it made four flights from Kelly Air Force Base in Texas to Tel Aviv during the first half of 1986. Officials have said anti-tank missiles for Iran were flown from Kelly to the Middle East where Israeli intermediaries handled the actual transfer.

On the next line of the report, Southern Air reports two flights from Lisbon to an airport designated as "YSV." Although Transportation Department officials said they do not know what "YSV" stands for, participants in the Southern Air operation said those letters were used for Ilopango. Documents from the downed C-123K also show "YSV" being used interchangeably with "MSSS," the international designation for Ilopango.

Lisbon has been cited by numerous sources involved with Contra arms purchases as a key center for the purchase of Contra weapons from international arms dealers, particularly those linked to the Israelis.

The two Lisbon flights and a third listed separately carried a total of 135 tons of cargo, according to the reports.

One administration source said North used retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord, a former top Pentagon official on the Middle East, as his "executive agent" in putting together the air wing. The source said the expenses for the air operation were paid from the Iranian arms profits.

The small air force ultimately included five airplanes - two C-123K cargo planes, two DHC-4 "Caribou" supply planes and one light Maule plane particularly effective on short runways.